Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/578583625

Downloaded on Mar 25, 2024

AT LEAST IT'S NOT NEW YORK

by Richard Meltzer

If you split your life income times 12 among all New Yorkers with a cup, among all those *south of 14th Street*, it wouldn't amount (per screaming unit need; per unit *second* of screaming unit need) to a flea on a whale's ass.

Hi. You know me. I'm the guy who hates this place. No, no change, I still hate it, but I just got back from that "other" place and would like to share with you how loathsome *it's* become. It's the North American Calcutta.

Well not "actually." There's still no leper colony, not an *official* one, and the principal religion isn't Hindu. Nor is the percentage of the total populace currently living in the streets quite as high as in that fabled Asian pus-pit — 'scuse me, I don't mean to besmirch the Third World! — but it's getting there. It's gotten so you can't walk half a block without facing the face of misery. And by half-block I mean "good" neighborhoods: Upper East Side, Gramercy Park. At Sixth Ave. between West Third St. and West Fourth it's more like every half-step.

And the face too: The face has evolved. It used to be, well, you could tell the junkie from the alky from the crazy from the mere homeless wretch; you could tell by the look on their face. There were distinctly different degrees and flavors of despair. Junkies were always the hungriest, the hurtingest; they almost kind of *defined* New York Despair. Now it's down to one basic look for everybody, a single undifferentiated despair, an across-the-board urgency one full evolution beyond what you'd see in the despairingest junkie of yore, one *intensity*. Christ, it's intense.

There was one guy whose routine was "GIMME MONEY! I need money! Got to have money! If you don't gimme money there's no telling what I'll do!" (No one was giving.) A lot of 'em growl, "Hey, I'm asking *nicely*" — it seems like a standard operational riff. You keep walking and they keep talking: "Next time I won't ask so nice." One ragged hepster waved snapshots of his daughter ("Five years old! Her mother won't feed her! In Pennsylvania!"), another yanked at the leash of a scrawny eye-bandaged hound ("Blind!" — I'm not making this up!! — "My dog needs an operation!"). Human blindos were everywhere by the *hundreds*. And of course cripples.

And just about everyone uses cups, like a paper soda or coffee cup. Cups full (or not so full) of coins. Coins-in-cup make a pretty good rattle. To accompany the pitch, y'know, the appeal. Paper money, you'd guess, goes straight in their pocket. Too gaudy, too risky to show, and too suggestive of windfall wealth: a bad ad for Need. I never saw any paper. I also noticed more pennies on the sidewalk, in the gutter, than I saw people with cups — a sure sign that pennies ain't worth *nada*. Or, per unit weight/volume, scavenging them's no longer cost-effective. I even saw occasional nickels.

But the cups tho, often cups would be the first (or only) thing you'd see. Cups extended, then you'd see an arm and possibly a face. Some streets it's like the arm scene in *Repulsion* where Catherine Deneuve walks down the hall and they reach out from both walls grabbin' at her. Only these arms don't grab, if they grabbed they couldn't hold — or rattle — the cup. At night you're walking and suddenly cups pop out of nowhere, out of pitchblack ether — street lights shining on cups and nothing but. Or take a 2 a.m., 3 a.m. cab ride and at every stoplight cups surround you, banging and tapping the windows, like something out of *Night of the Living Dead* or the werewolf car scene in *The Howling*. Only it ain't exactly at that scale or tempo of physical "threat," nor after the second stoplight is it much of a "shocker" — just another chapter/scene in the ongoing round-the-clock tear-your-heart-out no-quit misery cup show. Most popular cup logo: I LOVE NEW YORK.

And the ethnic breakdown, the races involved here: all. Or most. I didn't see too many Micronesians. And nobody older than, say, 70. It's a young man's game, and by man I mean persons; there were women begging with babies in strollers, one (around 20) with newborn twins plus a 2- and a 3-year-old. (It might've been the neighborhoods I hit but I didn't really see a lot of whores.)

Youngster's game: How could the old pull it off? Aside from the street exacting its toll, the brutal winters, the day-to-day ceaseless pain and ag, you've gotta be young just to keep up with all the fierce competition. Strictly on a bizness level, screaming need is not the easiest of sells even when you've got the frigging monopoly. (Imagine if Chrysler had to contend with 200 rival U.S. automakers, and 411 Japanese.) Once you've lost that good crisp youthful coin-rattle in the wrist, that loud booming youth-inflected GIMME *MONEY*! . . . you've lost it.

Even from the "buyer" side it's no snap, no easy light errand, y'know dispensing the monetary compensation. You look at a blockload of these fine folks, you count heads, and even if you're mr. or ms. generosity him/herself how do you *in fact* divvy up the $100 in your pocket in quarters, half-dollars and small bills? (There's a scene like this in Louis Malle's *Phantom India*, the famous giver-splits-his-change-among-multiple-beggars scene, but why namedrop another dumb film?) To

continued on next page

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.

Powered by Newspapers.com